

### Introduction: ESPON - from spatial observation to policy oriented outputs?

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## Introduction: *ESPON – from spatial observation to policy oriented outputs?*

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In February 2015, the European Commission approved the ESPON programme for the period 2014-2020. With a total budget of 48.7 Mio Euro (41.4 from the Commission) it is not only a considerable financial investment into spatial research and territorial development advice, but also a strong commitment to the further institutionalisation of spatial development related research at the European level. This might seem surprising as the European Union still does not have a clear mandate for spatial planning and binding territorial development policies; however, the Lisbon treaty signed in 2007 introduced “territorial cohesion” as a new objective, and foresees a shared competence between the EU and its member states, finally acknowledging, on the one hand, the obvious spatial impacts of EU policies (e.g. structural funds, environmental regulation), and the risk of increasing spatial discrepancies and socio-economic and ecological inequalities in a growing European Union, on the other.

This recognition has been a milestone in a complex, tardy and partly contested process that started in 1994 (see Tab. 1) when an informal meeting of the ministers for spatial planning of the then 12 member states plus Austria, Finland and Sweden agreed upon the so called Leipzig Principles (named after the meeting's venue under German presidency). The principles recognised, amongst others, the need for developing more coherent policy aims, and – due to the lack of reliable data at the EU level for spatial monitoring and forecast – the need “of evidence provision in the form of a network of national research institutes, which would have a solid foundation of trust in their

respective national contexts, a trust that would be inherited by the European network (or so it was hoped)” (Böhme and Schön 2006, p. 63). While the first comprehensive strategy paper of the EU, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) initiated in Leipzig in 1994

and adopted in 1999 was still elaborated by a self-organised collaboration between the Commission and authorities in the member states, the 1997 informal meeting launched a two years study programme which can be understood as the predecessor of the ESPON programmes.

### Milestones of EU spatial planning policies and research programmes

Year	EU policy milestone	Research programme/report	Territorial coverage
1994	Leipzig principles		
1995			
1997			
1998		SPESP	EU15
1999	ESDP		
2000			
2001			
2002		ESPON 2006	EU25 + Bulgaria Romania Norway Switzerland
2003			
2004			
2005			
2006			
2007	Lisbon Treaty, Territorial Agenda for the European Union, Territorial State and Perspectives	ESPON 2013	EU27 + Iceland Liechtenstein Norway Switzerland
2008	Green paper on Territorial Cohesion		
2009	an Agenda for a reformed cohesion policy – a place-based approach to meeting European Union challenges and expectations (“Barca report”)		
2010			
2011	Evaluation Report of the Territorial Agenda of the EU Territorial State and Perspectives of the EU 2011 update Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020		
2012			
2013			
2014			
2015	Approval of ESPON 2020	ESPON 2020	EU28 + Iceland Liechtenstein Norway Switzerland

For further details see BÖHME/SCHÖN 2006, DÜHR et al. 2007, DAVOUDI 2010. The synopsis is limited to the spatial development policy of the EU and associated partners. One might also include impetus from the Council of Europe and its standing committee of ministers responsible for spatial planning – CEMAT (Conférence Européenne des Ministres de l'Aménagement du Territoire).

Tab. 1: Milestones of EU spatial planning policies and research programmes

## Partners in ESPON 2013 projects



*Map: Partners in ESPON 2013 projects*

The Study Programme on European and Spatial Planning (SPESP) running from mid-1998 to end-1999 established 13 thematic working groups bringing together scholars from the then 15 member countries and tried to produce evidence on territorial development, for the first time providing valid and comparable data and reliable maps for the EU territory.

While the ESDP as a strategic document did not succeed in developing further towards a binding framework, and only had a punctual impact on subsequent EU initiatives such as INTERREG III (Waterhout and Stead 2007), the experiences with the Study Programme led to the implementation of the more ambitious European Spatial Planning Observation Net-

work (ESPON)<sup>1</sup>, set-up as an INTERREG programme. Was the collection, homogenisation and validation of European wide

1 While keeping the ESPON acronym, the official denomination of the programme has changed into *European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion* for ESPON 2013; the ESPON 2020 programme to date does not come with an explanatory name and only uses the programmatic slogan “Inspire policy making by territorial evidence” (see [www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu)).

data (including mapping) one of the core objectives of this first ESPON programme, the second release (2007-2013) slightly shifted towards more targeted analyses trying to respond to concrete demands from national and subnational authorities. The 2014-2020 programme seems to reinforce even further the support towards (sub-)national authorities who are – according to the subsidiarity principle – at the forefront of the implementation of territorial cohesion policy (e.g. see the “place-based approach” of the structural funds 2014-2020). This leaves to the European level a coordination and orientation role that is currently being shaped. As a hybrid institution deploying research and advisory functions, ESPON plays a key role in support of the decision making at all policy levels.

Despite its growing visibility in the political realm and the high number of scholars associated with the network (see Map), large parts of the scholarly community in geography, regional science, and spatial planning seem to know little about the programme’s output and future research opportunities, let alone the rich databases and mapping tools provided for both researchers and practitioners.

The remainder of this introduction aims at presenting further particularities, objectives, opportunities – but also at discussing inherent challenges of this complex endeavour, both in terms of its international architecture as well as its heterogeneous context regarding stakeholder expectations, political and research cultures. We will finally give an overview of the contributions to this theme issue.

### **The ESPON 2013 programme: contribution to the debated concept of territorial cohesion**

The objective of territorial cohesion left an important imprint, if not shaped, the ESPON 2013 programme, as much as the ESDP did on the 2006 programme. Both have similar policy aims, thus conferring continuity to ESPON’s research topics. Metropolitan regions, urban-rural functions, transport and accessibility, envi-

ronment and climate change, demography have been systematically analysed in both programmes. However, the ESDP and territorial cohesion differ in their degree of formalisation and therefore in their implementation scope. As iconic and innovative it is (Faludi 2003 and the special issue in 74(1) of *Town planning review*; Böhme and Schön 2006; Salez 2009), the ESDP is formally a political document upon which Ministers agreed during an informal meeting (ESDP 1999). Territorial cohesion is an objective of the European Union inscribed in the Lisbon Treaty (art. 3) in 2007. Yet, when the ESPON 2013 programme was negotiated, territorial cohesion was, and to some extent remains, a cryptic objective for policy makers as well as for many scholars (Dühr et al. 2010; Faludi and Waterhout 2005; Peyrony 2006; Waterhout 2008). Therefore, while the ESPON 2006 programme serves first and foremost as an analytical basis to the ESDP, continually updated (EC 2007:4; van Gestel and Faludi 2005), the ESPON 2013 intends in particular to define, conceptualise and concretise territorial cohesion. In parallel, a number of academics attempted to define (Schön 2005; Medeiros 2014) and operationalize territorial cohesion (Hamez 2005; Medeiros 2014). For doing so in two ways (both conceptually, empirically and for implementing this definition locally), the ESPON programme brought a substantial contribution to this debate (Chilla and Neufeld 2014).

First, at EU level, the INTERCO project lists “32 top indicators organised in 6 policy-oriented territorial objectives” (ESPON/INTERCO 2012, p. 1) to grasp territorial cohesion<sup>2</sup>. Those policy-oriented objectives are:

- Strong local economies ensuring global competitiveness;
- Innovative territories;
- Fair access to services, market and jobs;
- Inclusion and quality of life;

- Attractive regions of high ecological values and strong territorial capital;
- Integrated polycentric territorial development (ESPON/INTERCO, 2012, p. 1).

This approach demonstrates the role of mediator that ESPON plays at EU level between on the one hand the EU Commission and the member states setting-up the policy agenda and on the other hand national and European statistic institutions, setting-up and gathering data. In the particular context of the long-lasting debate on territorial cohesion within the EU institutions (territorial agenda 2007; territorial agenda 2020 in 2011), this pragmatic approach from the ESPON programme contributes to conceptualise and operationalize a concept which otherwise can remain political or vague. This is particularly crucial since this concept is meant, through the treaty, to be operationalized at all levels of governance.

Here comes the second originality of the ESPON 2013 programme. Through the so-called priority 2 “targeted analysis based on used demand”, it sets-up a procedure allowing (sub)-national authorities to initiate and follow-up a research project to eventually support the development of future spatial planning strategies. This logic is in line with the thinking of the territorial cohesion principle whose implementation relies on a shared competence between (sub)-national authorities and the EU. This shared competence creates a “need for the design of their policies to be supported by evidence and comparable information on the regions as well as on long-term evolutions and perspectives” (EC 2007, p. 7). Therefore, providing “evidence” to (sub)-national authorities is one important part of the ESPON 2013 programme’s duties. For example, the KITCASP project identified in specific countries/regions (Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Latvia) “key indicators for measuring territorial cohesion, economic competitiveness and sustainable developments” to guide their own policy development (KITCASP 2013, p. 5). With this kind of projects, ESPON

<sup>2</sup> A number of sectorial projects served to feed-in this list of indicators (e.g. TRACC for transports, SeGI for services of general interests, TIGER for competitiveness, TIPSE for poverty and exclusion)



has found a way to frame the dialogue between policy and science. This institutionalised dialogue becomes transparent and explicit, facilitating knowledge transfer. Within the ESPON 2006, although all project results are publically available online, the exchange between policy and research takes mostly place only through networking (Davoudi 2007).

During the 2007-2013, the ESPON programme played this role of interface between EU policy goal and “stakeholders” at EU and (sub-)national level with a number of projects (e.g. SIESTA illustrates at regional level each indicators of the EU2020 strategy, GEOSPECS defines, categorises and maps the geographical specificities officially recognised by the Lisbon treaty, SeGI maps at regional level the services of general interest recognised in the Lisbon treaty, ARTS sets-up a tool assessing the territorial impact of the EU directives).

The ESPON 2013 programme therefore acts as an interface at two levels; 1) concretising territorial cohesion by investigating the territorial dimension of EU sector policies; 2) between the EU and (sub-)national levels supporting the implementation of territorial development strategies. This has two important consequences for the programme itself in comparison with the ESPON 2006 programme.

First, while during the ESPON 2006 programme, the challenge was in particular data gathering and comparability at NUTS 1, 2 and 3 between member states, an important challenge of the ESPON 2013 programme remains data availability at NUTS 3 and below. This explains the strategic role of the DATABASE project, which compiles and stores the data from the ESPON projects. Although sensitive and not always palpable, cooperation with other EU institutions such as DG REGIO, EUROSTAT and the EEA is also a must. Yet, providing “targeted analysis” at sub-national level requires specific data, which is not always available or even do not exist (e.g. flow data between border regions). Research teams work mostly on the basis of Eurostat or ESPON

data since they can rarely acquire other datasets. In the worst case, this can limit the thoroughness of the analysis. In most of the cases, the data is used at NUTS 3 level, thus limiting the relevance of the information for stakeholders. The need for robust quantitative information is symptomatic of a turn that Cohesion policy 2020 has taken to quantify its “impacts”, despite the obvious limits of this approach (e.g. impacts are not always quantifiable, they also evolve in time). This reinforces the plea for developing qualitative research in the ESPON context (Davoudi 2007).

Second, the double challenge of the ESPON programme to 1) grasp the territorial impacts of EU policies and 2) to orient (sub-)national authorities in the implementation of cohesion policy. This leaves little space for manoeuvre to undertake research questioning or going beyond policy postulates. Few research projects did however so within the ESPON 2013 programme (e.g. the KIT project demonstrates the limits of the widely used postulate that investment in R&D necessarily leads to GDP growth, KIT 2012).

The ESPON 2013 programme has brought a substantial contribution, especially on the concept of territorial cohesion. Under the auspice of the Coordination Unit, the dialogue between policy and research has been institutionalised through the “targeted analyses”. This represents a major contribution to 1) analytically support the implementation of policy objectives and 2) implement transparency in the dialogue between research and policy. However, the academic board (“sounding board”) usually following-up each ESPON project was not in place for these projects. One can regret this. This major contribution should not hide the on-going debate on its effective capacity to count at EU level when it comes to bringing in the territorial dimension of EU policies. The “territorially blind” EU2020 strategy conducted the Polish presidency to release a report entitled “how to strengthen the territorial dimension of ‘Europe 2020’ and the EU Cohesi-

on policy” (Böhme et al. 2011). The ESPON 2020 programme will be challenged on how this can be operationalized at EU and (sub-)national level, and continually, on how does “territory matters”.

### **The future ESPON programme 2014-2020: heading towards policy oriented outputs?**

As all the other EU programmes, ESPON faces new challenges in a changing Europe. One of this is the new main European strategy, the already mentioned EU2020 strategy. This strategy focuses on inclusive, smart and sustainable growth and replaces the Lisbon and the Gothenburg strategies, aims at orienting policies at national and regional level, especially through the new EU structural funding period (European Commission 2010). Moreover, with the New Territorial Agenda “the diversity of territories is [seen as] a potential for development, and that the distinctive identities of local and regional communities are a key relevance in this regard” (TAEU 2020, article 12).

This leads to a third programming period: ‘ESPON 2020’. Different objectives are asked to be included into the new programme coming from the ESPON member states, the managing authority, the regional and local stakeholders as well as the researchers involved in the programme. ESPON 2020 Programme will have two priority axis: priority axis 1: “Territorial Evidence, Transfer, Observation, Tools and Outreach” and the priority axis 2 “Technical Assistance”. The first priority axis includes four different specific non-administrative objectives that are close to the once used in the ESPON 2013 Programme:

- “Enhanced European territorial evidence production through applied research and analyses”
- “Upgraded Knowledge Transfer and Use of Analytical User Support”
- “Improved Territorial Observation and Tools for Territorial Analyses”
- “Wider outreach and Uptake of Territorial Evidence” (European Commission 2015)

All axis have the objective of a “leaner, and more effective implementation provisions and more proficient programme assistance” (European Commission 2015).

Even though the structure sounds quite familiar several larger organizational changes are made. Therefore a new European Grouping of Territorial Cohesion (EGTC) becomes the Single Beneficiary, then using public procurement procedures and service contracts to engage research teams. This new institutional structure shall simplify the administrative burden for all participants. In addition more research and communication are planned to be done in-house – which means by staff of the new EGTC which contains on the former Coordination Unit (European Commission 2015). However, this new structure runs the risk to a more short response on policy questions than to do high quality research.

According to the new logic of the EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020, ESPON will concentrate on all eleven thematic objectives defined by the Cohesion Policy with a special territorial evidence:

1. “Research & Innovation.
2. Information and communication technologies (ICT).
3. Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).
4. Shift towards a low-carbon economy.
5. Climate change adaptation & risk prevention and management.
6. Environmental protection & resource efficiency.
7. Sustainable transport & removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures.
8. Employment & supporting labour mobility.
9. Social inclusion & combating poverty.
10. Education, skills & lifelong learning.
11. Institutional capacity building & efficient public administrations.” (European Commission 2014).

All these new measures shall ensure the “transferability” of ESPON results towards the “policy arena”. The main fu-

ture question mark remains on the orientation of the future research projects under priority axis 1. Even though it is stated that the primary target group shall be European and national stakeholders and authorities implementing ESI funding (European Commission 2014), it is not explained if this shall especially be done by the in-house research and which thematic focus will become the central one.

### Outlook

After more than 20 years of EU spatial planning policies, several developments can be seen: an increasing institutionalization of spatial development policies, growing bureaucratic challenges, changing research topics and research perspectives as well as the impact on territorialization and spatial planning (see Tab. 2). From a researchers perspective, some of these changes must be questioned. Schmitt and Smas (2013, p. 7) criticize the quantitative research orientation in ESPON and other projects and argue for more in-depth qualitative analyses. Further, the new service contract logic will certainly simplify the administrative handling of ESPON projects; at the same time the contracts might confront academic research with unusual constraints and often predetermined research questions and methodologies. It remains unclear who will be securing high-qualitative research standards.

The growing share of in-house research foreseen to be done by researchers working in the ESPON Coordination Unit might lead to faster results, but might also be missing a peer validation hitherto insured within the transnational project groups (TPG).

And finally, as all research conducted at the science/policy interface, there is a certain risk that spatial development research might lose independency. In this regard, Schmitt and Smas (2013, p. 7) bring forward the argument that “the collaboration between researchers and policy-makers is not defined clearly enough, as the production of regional evidence might allow for various interpretations

that can be easily colored by the political perspectives of the person(s) involved”.

Looking back at the achievements of the ESPON 2013 programme, the articles of this theme issue are a selection of project reports presented at the last scientific conference held at the University of Luxembourg in September 2013. Even though they illustrate the topical and methodological variety of the projects, they can only be singular examples, hopefully showing the complementarity and the potential for further exchange between the often rather applied ESPON projects and more fundamental research on similar topics.

In his contribution on **locational patterns** of logistics activities in Northwest Europe<sup>3</sup>, Mathieu Strale (Brussels), focuses on both inherent methodological challenges as well as the territorial impacts of the logistics sector and related public policies. Based on findings from the GEOSPECS project, Christophe Sohn and Nora Stambolic (Luxembourg) propose a typology of cross-border urban areas and their recent development dynamics. Roberto Camagni, Roberta Capello, Andrea Caragliu and Ugo Fratesi (Milano) discuss trend scenarios (ET2050) regarding (“after crisis”) economic growth dynamics and potentially growing spatial disparities (both between states and within states). And finally, Peter Schmitt and Lisa van Well (Stockholm) report on the TANGO project that tried to conceptualize, operationalize and explore the territorial dimension and spatial specificities of governance processes.

Detailed information on all projects of the ESPON 2013 programme (including comprehensive project reports) can be found and downloaded at: [http://www.espon.eu/main/Menu\\_Projects/Menu\\_ProjectOverview/](http://www.espon.eu/main/Menu_Projects/Menu_ProjectOverview/)

<sup>3</sup> This project was not part of an ESPON project, but reflects the collaboration that ESPON intends to have with other research networks (e.g. EUGEO).

Overview and comparison of the main characteristics of the ESPON 2006, 2013 and 2020 programmes			
	Period 2004–2006	Period 2007–2013	Period 2014–2020
<b>Name</b>	European Spatial Planning Observatory Network	Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion	European Territorial Observation Network
<b>Policy context</b>	Wide debate on a European competence in the field of spatial planning	Conceptualisation and application of territorial cohesion at EU and national level	Effectiveness of the territorial dimension in other EU policies  Institutionalised place-based approach in applying territorial cohesion policy
<b>Back-ground</b>	'Knowledge and research in the field of spatial planning development is still nationally oriented in the majority of cases. This shortcoming is [...] based [...] on a lack of resources for research covering the whole EU territory and, even more important, for taking a comprehensive view from an EU-wide perspective.' (ESPON 2004, p. 4)	'Policy makers dealing with development of regions and larger territories need for the design of their policies to be supported by evidence and comparable information on the regions as well as on long-term evolutions and perspectives' (ESPON 2007, p. 7)	'Regions and cities of Europe can make an important contribution to the objectives of growth and jobs agenda of the Europe 2020 Strategy and to a European territory well-balanced in terms of economic, social and territorial cohesion. Such policy efforts will require robust, comparable and analytical territorial evidence' (ESPON 2015, p. 5)
<b>Main objectives</b>	'Add value to existing national research by taking a clear European and trans-national focus and improving the understanding of the diversity of the European territory.'  'Develop orientations for instruments and institutions necessary for a better perception and application of the ESDP policy options by actors at all levels from the EU to the local level.' (ESPON 2004, p. 4)	'The outcome of ESPON 2006 programme has made an important first step towards improving the European knowledge base. Further comparable information and evidence on all regions of the entire European territory shall support future evidence based regional policy. Better and comparable information can help regions meet the renewed paradigm for European development according to the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategy and to see potential for improving regional competitiveness and territorial cohesion.' (ESPON 2007, p. 8)	'Supporting policy development institutional capacity, effective policymaking and efficient public administration with European territorial evidence'  'Grow the provision and policy use of pan-European, comparable, systematic and reliable territorial evidence' (ESPON 2015, p. 7)
<b>Priorities of the programme</b>	1. Thematic projects on important spatial developments 2. Policy impact projects 3. Co-ordinating cross-thematic projects 4. ESPON research briefing and scientific networking 5. Technical assistance	1. Applied research on territorial development, competitiveness and cohesion: evidence on European territorial trends, perspectives and policy impacts 2. Targeted analysis based on used demand: European perspective to development of different types of territories 3. Scientific platform and tools: territorial indicators and data, analytical tools and scientific support 4. Capitalisation, ownership and participation: Capacity building, dialogue and networking 5. Technical assistance, analytical support and communication	1. Enhanced production of territorial evidence through applied research and analyses 2. Upgraded knowledge transfer and use of analytical used demand 3. Improved territorial observation and tools for territorial analyses 4. Wider outreach and uptake of territorial evidence 5. Leaner, and more effective and efficient implementation provisions and more proficient programme assistance

Source: own compilation based on ESPON 2004, ESPON 2007, ESPON 2015

Tab. 2: Overview and comparison of the main characteristics of the ESPON 2006, 2013 and 2020 programmes

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